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THE SITUATION IN AFGHANISTAN AND ITS IMPLICATIONS FOR INTERNATIONAL PEACE AND SECURITY

Report of the Secretary-General

I. INTRODUCTION

1. The present report is submitted pursuant to paragraph 22 of General Assembly resolution 53/203 A of 18 December 1998, in which the Assembly requested the Secretary-General to report every three months during its fifty-third session on the progress of the United Nations Special Mission to Afghanistan (UNSMA). The present report, which covers developments since the issuance of the Secretary-General's report of 21 June 1999 (A/53/1002-S/1999/698), is also submitted in response to requests by the Security Council for regular information on the main developments in Afghanistan.

II. RECENT DEVELOPMENTS IN AFGHANISTAN

A. Political developments

2. At the invitation of the Government of Uzbekistan, the Deputy Ministers for Foreign Affairs of the members of the "six plus two" group met in Tashkent on 19/20 July. My Special Envoy for Afghanistan, Lakhdar Brahimi, participated in the meeting. The two Afghan warring sides were also invited and attended as observers. The Taliban delegation was led by Mullah Muttaqi, the Taliban's acting Minister of Information, and that of the United Front (UF) by Dr. Abdullah, Deputy Foreign Minister of the Rabbani Government. The meeting adopted the Tashkent Declaration on Fundamental Principles for a Peaceful Settlement of the Conflict in Afghanistan (A/54/174-S/1999/812). In the Declaration, the members of the group, inter alia, reiterated their commitment to a peaceful political settlement of the Afghan conflict and called for the resumption of peace talks between the Taliban and the United Front.

Significantly, the group agreed not to provide military support to any Afghan party and to prevent the use of their respective territories for such purposes. I sent a message to the meeting, expressing the hope that the adoption of the Declaration would be followed by concrete and concerted action by the group to implement their accord. The group, as well as my Special Envoy, made strong appeals to both Afghan sides to refrain from initiating any major new military offensives. However, it is noteworthy that only one week after the Tashkent meeting, the Taliban began a major offensive against the United Front in the Shomali plains, located to the north of Kabul.

3. Since the Tashkent meeting, there has been no direct political contact or meeting between the Taliban and the UF. UNSMA has tried to act as a go-between to keep some contacts alive and has succeeded on occasion in channelling messages between the two leaderships. But the essential stand of both sides remains unaltered. The Taliban insist that the UF must embrace the Emirate system while the UF question the Taliban's popular mandate to make this demand. A large bomb attack, which occurred outside the residence of the Taliban supreme leader Mullah Omar in Kandahar on 25 August and which was apparently designed to kill him, is likely to further reduce the already low level of trust between the two sides. The UF's announcement on 14 September of its intention to form a new 10-member cabinet of ministers will harden the divide between the UF and the Taliban.

4. On 18 August, the Government of Pakistan announced that it was undertaking an initiative to facilitate reconciliation between the two Afghan parties. Accordingly, a Pakistan delegation met a UF delegation in Dushanbe on 18 August and subsequently met with Mullah Omar in Kandahar before returning again to Dushanbe for talks with the UF on 22/23 August. However, the UF has publicly stated that it rejects any mediatory attempt by Pakistan on the grounds that, as the UF asserts, Pakistan's military and political support for the Taliban prevents it from carrying out such a role. As for the Taliban leadership, it does not appear to show interest in the purported Pakistan peace proposals. Nevertheless, the Pakistan delegation is pursuing its initiative and revisited Dushanbe on 14 September and Kandahar on 16 September to meet respectively with UF and Taliban representatives.

5. In another development, the United States of America on 5 July imposed financial and economic sanctions against the Taliban. It is understood that those measures will remain in place until Osama bin Laden, who is accused by the United States in connection with terrorist acts, is expelled or extradited from Afghanistan. United States officials underlined that the imposition of the sanctions was not designed to harm the people of Afghanistan and that the United States would remain one of the largest providers of humanitarian assistance to the Afghan people.

6. As foreshadowed in my last quarterly report (A/53/1002-S/1999/698, para. 6), the former King of Afghanistan, Zahir Shah, met in Rome in late June with a group of Afghan intellectuals and political leaders living abroad to consult with them on the next steps to be taken regarding his initiative to convene an emergency Loya Jirgah (Grand Assembly). Ensuing from these consultations was the decision to form a preparatory council to develop the

initiative and to launch a campaign within the region to explain the initiative and rally support for it.

B. Military situation

7. During the period under review, the level of fighting reached an unprecedented scale for 1999 when the Taliban launched their ground and air offensive against the United Front on 28 July. The Taliban offensive was reinforced by 2,000 to 5,000 recruits, mostly emanating from religious schools within Pakistan, many of them non-Afghans and some below the age of 14.

8. North of Kabul, this Taliban offensive led to the capture of most of the Shomali plains up to the entrance to the Panjshir valley. In northern Afghanistan, the Taliban captured the Amu Darya (Oxus) river port of Sher Khan Bandar and the nearby districts of Imam Sahib and Dasht-i-Archi.

9. On 5 August, the UF forces counter-attacked Taliban positions and retook virtually all the territory lost to the Taliban in the previous week. During the fighting the Taliban suffered heavy losses in men and material, particularly in the Shomali plains, where they were attacked from the rear and the flanks by UF fighters who had remained in hiding as the Taliban advanced during their initial offensive.

10. On 11 August, the Taliban regrouped and launched a new attack from the front line north of Kabul, advancing cautiously and securing the terrain through the forced displacement of the civilian population and the destruction of houses and the agricultural infrastructure. The UF reopened new areas of conflict in Kunar and Laghman provinces in the eastern region and in Ghor Province in the central region in an effort to reduce pressure on their forces and draw away some of the Taliban's superior numerical strength. The UF made some minor territorial gains. Additionally, the fighting at Dara-i-Suf in Samangan Province, which had been ongoing since the spring, continued unabated.

11. During the month of fighting between 28 July and 28 August, UNSMA estimates some 1,200 Taliban and 600 UF fighters were killed. In territorial terms, the fighting has not greatly changed the overall balance. The Taliban have established a new front line north of Kabul, running from the "old Kabul road" north of Qarah Bagh, traversing Bagram airbase, which is occupied by the Taliban, and the Kohi Safi mountains, to a point between Tagab and Nijrab. In northern Afghanistan, the Taliban in September continued to exert pressure on UF emplacements to the north of Kunduz city and to the east of Khanabad town in Takhar Province. The UF was keeping up its diversionary attacks in the north-west and the south-east of the country.

12. Prior to the 28 July Taliban offensive, there had been intense fighting to the east of Kunduz city and in the Dara-i-Suf District of Samangan Province, as well as heavy artillery and rocket exchange on the front line north of Kabul. The Taliban airforce kept up its bombing campaign against UF military and civilian targets. The UF continued with rocket attacks against Kabul airport and its environs. On 27 July, 11 rockets struck Kabul airport and the surrounding area, including at a time when a scheduled United Nations flight was

making its landing approach within the flight safety time agreed between the United Nations and the two Afghan sides. The United Nations aborted the aircraft's landing and temporarily suspended further flights to Kabul pending the receipt of a satisfactory explanation and reassurance on safety from both sides. These were subsequently received and the flights resumed a week later.

III. ACTIVITIES OF THE MISSION

13. UNSMA, through its regular contacts with the two sides to the conflict as well as a wide range of independent Afghan political figures and groups, has continued to work to encourage the Afghans to settle their differences peacefully. While the two sides have not shown much willingness to do so, the Mission has played a useful role in conveying messages and reactions between the leaderships of the two sides as well as keeping Afghans inside and outside Afghanistan informed of each other's thinking.

14. During the reporting period, UNSMA kept a rotational presence in Kabul and visited a number of locations inside the country. It should be recalled in this connection that last April, the Mission's military advisers returned to the Afghan capital for the first time since August 1998. The senior military adviser participated in a number of UNSMA missions, including to Dushanbe, Kandahar and Faizabad.

15. UNSMA has begun the recruitment of a first group of civil affairs officers, including a coordinator for the Civil Affairs Unit. It is expected that, security conditions permitting, the deployment of UNSMA's civil affairs officers will be initiated by the middle of November. As indicated in my last report (A/53/1002-S/1999/698, para. 18), in view of the complex and difficult situation on the ground, the objectives of this programme should be regarded as rather modest. During a recent mission to Geneva, UNSMA's acting Head of Mission discussed the establishment of the Civil Affairs Unit with senior United Nations officials, including the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights.

IV. MY SPECIAL ENVOY AND ACTIVITIES AT UNITED NATIONS HEADQUARTERS

16. As indicated in paragraph 2 above, my Special Envoy, Lakhdar Brahimi, participated on 19/20 July in the Tashkent meeting of the "six plus two" group. During his stay in Tashkent, Mr. Brahimi had numerous formal and informal contacts with the delegations. He was received on 20 July by the President of the Republic of Uzbekistan, Islam Karimov. Prior to going to Tashkent, Mr. Brahimi made a short stopover in Islamabad where he met with the Foreign Minister of Pakistan, Sartaj Aziz. On his return from Tashkent, Mr. Brahimi stayed for four days in Kabul where he held extensive discussions with the Taliban leaders. He then returned to Islamabad where he had further wide-ranging consultations with senior officials of the Government of Pakistan, representatives of Member States, independent Afghan actors and organizations from both within and outside the United Nations system working in the humanitarian field. He was received by the Prime Minister of Pakistan on 29 July.

17. In Tashkent, Mr. Brahimi brought together the Taliban and the UF for a face-to-face meeting which lasted some two hours. The UF delegation said in the meeting and publicly afterwards that their side remained ready for an unconditional ceasefire and further direct talks with the Taliban under United Nations auspices without preconditions. Representatives of the Taliban, however, stated that they had no mandate to make similar commitments. They reiterated that they were in no position to contemplate any political solution outside of the "Emirate system". After the end of the "six plus two" meeting, Commander Massoud came to Tashkent and held separate meetings with several delegations as well as with my Special Envoy.

18. In Kabul, Mr. Brahimi met with, among others, Mullah Mohammed Rabbani, the head of the Taliban interim council in Kabul, and Mullah Mohammed Hassan Akhund, the Taliban's "acting Foreign Minister". In all his meetings, my Special Envoy made an appeal to the Taliban in the strongest terms not to launch their anticipated offensive. His interlocutors in Kabul denied that a large-scale military attack was being planned, while reiterating their strong mistrust of the UF and Commander Massoud.

19. Prior to the meeting of the "six plus two" group in Tashkent, Mr. Brahimi had a number of meetings in New York with members of the group, as well as with representatives of the two warring parties. On 7 July, Mr. Brahimi convened a meeting of the "six plus two" group at the ambassadorial level.

20. The Security Council was briefed by the Department of Political Affairs on developments in Afghanistan during informal consultations on 28 July and 5 August. Moreover, on 27 August, the Council convened an open debate on Afghanistan. The Under-Secretary-General for Political Affairs, Kieran Prendergast, delivered the opening statement in the debate, updating the members of the Council on the situation in Afghanistan. Following Mr. Prendergast's briefing, a total of 28 delegations took the floor.

V. HUMANITARIAN ACTIVITIES AND HUMAN RIGHTS

A. Humanitarian situation

21. The upsurge in the conflict is having a devastating effect on the lives of civilians and, as in the past, the warring parties have shown little respect for lives and livelihoods. A United Nations mission to the Panjshir valley at the end of August reported that up to 100,000 persons had been displaced in the area. The World Food Programme (WFP) is preparing a large-scale movement of food commodities to those seriously in need of food. The health situation of the internally displaced persons (IDPs) is reported as being under control, although the availability of shelter materials remains of concern.

22. Lack of access to the Panjshir valley continues to be a serious impediment to providing for those affected by the recent fighting. The Taliban have so far denied access to the Shomali plains, where widespread burning of crops and destruction of homes reportedly have occurred. Emergency task forces in Islamabad, Kabul and Dushanbe are in regular contact to ensure effective coordination and optimize the use of all available information.

23. A further 40,000 persons are in Kabul following forced displacement from the Shomali plains. Since 7 August, WFP has been providing food assistance to the approximately 10,000 people (almost 90 per cent of them women and children) currently housed in the former Soviet embassy compound. The International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) is providing food and non-food packages for IDPs in other parts of the city. The United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) has participated in the collaborative effort to support IDPs in Kabul through health and supplementary feeding and non-food items such as 10,000 blankets.

24. Ongoing conflict in the central area of Hazarajat has further worsened the plight of civilians in that region. The main focus of humanitarian action has been an inter-agency emergency assistance for food security for 30,000 vulnerable households. Further to this ongoing food security work, the United Nations Coordinator's Office has launched a multi-agency response to conflict-related needs in the Bamyan valley. Some 60,000 people who had been displaced during the conflict earlier in the year have returned. This coordinated response is addressing food, shelter, health and employment needs. The operation is scheduled to continue in additional districts in the coming months.

25. The overall food security situation in Afghanistan is expected to deteriorate because of the 16 per cent reduction in the cereal harvest for 1999 following the driest winter in 40 years. As a result, there will be a greater reliance upon external food assistance, such as that provided through WFP's bakery projects. WFP currently supports the provision of heavily subsidized bread to over 400,000 of Afghanistan's most vulnerable people in the urban centres of Kabul and Jalalabad. A bakery is also to be opened in Mazar-i-Sharif; it will serve a further 112,000 people identified as particularly vulnerable to food insecurity, such as female-headed households, children and the handicapped.

26. The World Health Organization (WHO) and UNICEF, in collaboration with Afghan health officials and NGOs, completed the second round of National Immunization Days for polio, reaching more than 4 million children. The coverage survey showed that both rounds of the campaign reached about 85 per cent of the children under age 5. WHO and UNICEF also supported a house-to-house "mopping-up" campaign after an acute polio outbreak was identified, with 14 cases of confirmed polio virus in June and July in Kunduz Province. In response to other health needs, UNICEF provided essential life-saving drugs and helped carry out chlorination of water sources in areas affected by cholera and gastroenteritis.

27. Voluntary repatriation of refugees from Pakistan to Afghanistan continues, albeit in smaller numbers than during the second quarter of 1999. The outbreak of heavy fighting at the end of July forced many refugee groups to reconsider and postpone their return. In July and August, with the assistance of the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) 2,564 families (14,024 persons) returned from Baluchistan and the North-West Frontier Province of Pakistan.

28. Following the repatriation of several smaller groups of Afghans from the Islamic Republic of Iran in June, July and August, the planned larger voluntary repatriation programme of Afghans from the Islamic Republic is yet to commence,

as negotiations on an agreement between the United Nations and the Iranian authorities remain to be finalized. However, deportations of Afghans from the Islamic Republic are continuing in large numbers, at a rate of more than 1,000 persons per week. Except for a larger-scale joint reintegration project in the eastern region of Afghanistan, UNHCR's efforts in providing initial reintegration assistance to returnees focus on assistance in rebuilding shelter and in providing potable water to returnees and returnee-affected communities.

29. As of the end of July, the United Nations-coordinated Mine Action Programme for Afghanistan had cleared 35.9 square kilometres of mined and battlefield areas and surveyed 54.6 sq km of such areas. The total remaining mined area, including new surveyed areas, is estimated at 704 sq km, of which over 90 per cent is agricultural and grazing land. The Programme has received US$ 16.4 million against its total requirement of $25.6 million for 1999 and has a shortfall of $9.2 million for its activities for the remainder of the year. During the past quarter, as a result of the recent fighting, there have been reports of new mining in the provinces of Baghlan, Kapisa, Badakhshan, Takhar and Kunduz. The Mine Action Programme is investigating the extent of mine contamination in those areas and will implement a mine action plan once the security situation permits. There have been no reports of new mines laid in areas that have been previously cleared.

B. Human rights

30. The human rights situation of Afghans continues to be of major concern. The combination of widespread poverty and protracted conflict, including the deliberate abuse of civilians and means of livelihood, continues to take an incredible toll. Deplorable socio-economic conditions coupled with the direct and indirect impact of the war makes Afghanistan one of the most deadly places on earth, particularly for women, children and others made vulnerable by years of unceasing conflict and growing impoverishment.

31. Civilians trapped in war zones and areas contested by the Taliban and the UF are seen to be the most vulnerable. Earlier this year, non-combatants in the central highlands of Hazarajat had to flee for their lives as both warring parties attempted to exert control in the area. Many were reported to have been summarily executed, detained or forced to flee their burning homes and property. However, a significant number of those who fled are still at great risk; they continue to suffer disproportionately from the conflict as they struggle to survive in barren and mountainous terrain even though warfare as such has ceased in the central highlands. Many are unable or unwilling to return given the devastation in the area and fear of further violence, including gross violations of human rights.

32. This pattern of warfare - intentional abuse of civilians coupled with the destruction of their property - has characterized the latest bout of fighting in the Shomali plains north of Kabul. Since early August, people have been obliged to abandon their homes as a result of either forced or involuntary displacement. The separation of men from families, their arbitrary detention, violence against women, the use of child soldiers, indiscriminate bombing and the use of landmines continue to add to the dismal human rights record of Afghanistan.

33. The Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in Afghanistan, Mr. Kamal Hossain, has been in regular contact with the authorities in Kandahar since his visit last May (A/53/1002-S/1999/698, paras. 37-38). However, with regard to the human rights situation in the war-affected central highlands of Hazarajat, the Taliban authorities have neither offered evidence of remedial action as proposed by Mr. Hossain nor given him permission to visit the area. In visits to Kabul from 9 to 12 September, Mr. Hossain and the Special Rapporteur on violence against women, Ms. Radhika Coomaraswamy, met with the authorities and other concerned actors and once again stressed the absolute importance of ending the policy and practice of discrimination against women. Ms. Coomaraswamy remarked that she had "never seen suffering like [she had found] in Afghanistan." While noting some improvements, for example in terms of women's access to health care, she called attention to a systematic pattern of violation of women's rights. She also noted that, notwithstanding the sentiments currently expressed by representatives of the UF on the situation of women, they were responsible for first introducing restrictive practices and their period of rule in Kabul had been one of the worst for Afghan women.

34. An investigation team of the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights has been undertaking research into the alleged massacres of 1997 and 1998. At the request of the Head of the Mission, the High Commissioner has approved an extension of fieldwork which is now scheduled for completion on 23 September 1999. The report of the investigation will be submitted to the High Commissioner by 1 October 1999.

VI. QUESTION OF ILLEGAL DRUGS

35. The annual opium poppy survey of the United Nations Office for Drug Control and Crime Prevention indicates that Afghanistan is witnessing a major increase in opium poppy cultivation. The Office estimates that this increase will make Afghanistan by far the largest producer of opium, with about 75 per cent of the world's opium production. Its total production of raw opium for 1999 was estimated to be a record of approximately 4,600 metric tonnes. This is more than double the estimated production of 2,100 metric tonnes for 1998. The survey reports that during the 1998/99 growing season an estimated 90,983 hectares of opium poppy were cultivated in Afghanistan. This unprecedented level of opium poppy cultivation represents an increase of approximately 43 per cent over the 1997/98 season.

36. The number of districts in which opium poppy was cultivated increased from 73 in 1998 to 104 in 1999; 80 per cent of the districts surveyed during the previous growing season experienced an increase in opium poppy cultivation in 1999. In addition, in most provinces, ideal weather conditions during the harvest resulted, in very good opium yields (quantity of opium harvested per hectare cultivated). Analysis suggests that the estimated increase in opium poppy cultivation in Helmand Province alone accounted for 51 per cent of the total increase in opium poppy cultivation in 1999, while the estimated 5,168 hectare increase in opium poppy cultivation in Nangarhar Province in 1999 represented approximately 19 per cent of the total increase.

VII. OBSERVATIONS

37. It is profoundly disturbing that only one week after the meeting of the "six plus two" group in Tashkent on 19/20 July, the Taliban forces started a new military offensive. This flagrant disregard for the Tashkent Declaration (see para. 2) once again raises serious concerns about the intentions of the Taliban leadership, which evidently continues to believe in a military solution to the Afghan conflict. I feel obliged to reiterate my view, which has been endorsed on numerous occasions by the General Assembly and the Security Council, as well as by the "six plus two" group, that there can be no military solution to the conflict in Afghanistan. Peace can only be achieved through negotiations and reconciliation and not by territorial conquest.

38. The UF have repeatedly made clear to my Special Envoy and to UNSMA that they are willing to talk with the Taliban in order to reach a solution to the country's problems. I urge the Taliban leadership to accept this offer. As both sides know full well, UNSMA remains ready and willing to help facilitate talks in a conducive atmosphere.

39. It is my sad duty once more to alert the international community to the worsening human rights situation in Afghanistan. The Taliban's conduct of forced displacement of the civilian population during their recent offensive in the Shomali plains is a particularly alarming signal which reflects the movement's apparent disregard for the concerns expressed by the international community. Since taking office, I have repeatedly raised my own concerns about the human rights situation in Afghanistan. I take this opportunity once again to urge the Afghan parties to take urgent measures to improve the situation and, as an immediate and first step, to ensure the protection of civilians.

40. I am deeply distressed over reports indicating the involvement in the fighting, mainly on the side of the Taliban forces, of thousands of non-Afghan nationals, mostly students from religious schools and some as young as 14 years old. In this connection, I appeal to all parties to respect the Convention on the Rights of the Child. It is indeed very disturbing that, not only are external forces continuing to fuel the fighting inside Afghanistan with deliveries of ammunition and other war-making materials, but an increasing number of other nationals are taking part in the actual combat, as well as the planning of military offensives. If this trend is not halted and reversed, the Afghan conflict will further evolve in the direction of an even more widespread and destructive regional conflict.

41. Furthermore, it is profoundly troubling that Afghanistan seems to be setting new records in drug production, which will have negative consequences for global health. The increased drug-trafficking activities, in particular stemming from Taliban-controlled areas, must also be seen as a vital instrument for fuelling the Afghans' war-making capabilities.

42. The unabated external involvement in the Afghan conflict leads me to raise the question of the role of the "six plus two" group. The group was originally established with the intention of adopting a joint strategy towards reaching a peaceful solution of the Afghan conflict. It appears that, despite the agreements on texts and declarations, the "six plus two" group has not been able

to make real progress on a more unified approach vis-à-vis the warring parties in Afghanistan. Words must be put into political practice. In fact, by their continuous support for certain Afghan factions, some members of the "six plus two" appear mostly to be paying lip service to their own stated intentions. I thus share the particular concern of my Special Envoy, Lakhdar Brahimi, about the practical usefulness of the "six plus two" for the United Nations peacemaking efforts in Afghanistan. I therefore support my Special Envoy's recommendation to review the United Nations approach regarding the Afghan conflict, including the mechanism of Member States' support. The outcome of this review will be shared with the General Assembly and the Security Council in my final report of 1999.

43. Before concluding, I should like to pay special thanks and tribute to the Government of Uzbekistan for hosting the Tashkent meeting of the "six plus two" group. I also wish to acknowledge the tireless efforts of Mr. Brahimi, my Special Envoy for Afghanistan, as well as those of the staff of UNSMA, for their continuous endeavours, many times against great political and military odds, to make progress towards a peaceful resolution of the protracted Afghan conflict.